Recognizing Feelings

Today is the 25th of November 1999 and we are in the Lower Hamlet, we know that we have thirty seven days to live before the arrival of the year 2000. I like to visualize the 21st century as a beautiful hill. It would be wonderful to climb the hill together. To climb, is not to arrive, but just for the pleasure of climbing.

Suppose here is the year 2000 and here is 2100 and this must be 2050 and we have 37 days before the arrival at this point. To climb a hill together does not mean that we want to arrive as soon as possible at the year 2050, but just to enjoy the climbing, especially if we climb with the Sangha, people who know how to appreciate what is happening in the present moment because there are many wonders of life that are available in the here and the now and climbing is not to arrive, just to climb, just to enjoy climbing.

The practice of Buddhism is the practice of living deeply every moment of your daily life and the heart of the practice is mindfulness, because mindfulness is the capacity to be there, fully present in the here and the now. And when we have the energy of mindfulness we are capable of being there in the here and the now because that is a basic condition for touching deeply life. If you are distracted, if your mind is caught by your regret concerning the past, or the fear and uncertainty about the future, then you are not capable of being there fully alive in the here and the now. Therefore, you miss all the wonders of life that are available in that moment. That is why mindfulness is at the heart of Buddhist practice, you have to be mindful of every moment of your daily life.

When you drink your morning tea you should drink your tea in such a way that life should be possible in that moment. Peace, stability and joy be possible in that moment of tea drinking. You have to be concentrated, you have to be mindful of the tea in order for your tea drinking to be a real act of mindfulness. Only by drinking your tea in mindfulness that you can enjoy really the tea, you have to be totally present in that moment of drinking tea. You have to help the tea to reveal itself one hundred percent to you. You have to offer yourself one hundred percent for the tea and then you and the tea will become perfect in that moment. And the tea drinking can bring you a lot of happiness. That is simple, that is something you can do and that is the practice.

When you sit with your son or your daughter, sit in such a way that you be there one hundred percent of yourself, for him, for her. You will see that your son or your daughter will reveal himself or herself to you one hundred percent. You are available to him to her and she will be available to you one hundred percent. So, sit with your daughter in such a way that you are totally present and alive so that the moment of sitting together becomes an eternal moment. A moment of joy, of peace. If you are caught by your worries, by your regret, your fear, your anger you are not there and your daughter, your son is not there either.

When you look at the morning sky you look at the sky in such a way that the sky

will reveal to you one hundred percent of itself, and the basic condition is that you be there one hundred percent for the sky. I remember one day I received the visit of a reporter from San Francisco. He was there to interview me and I invited him to have tea with me in the garden. I proposed that he forget the interview, that he just enjoy the tea with me and I gave him instructions as to how to enjoy the tea, to be there fully for the tea and he liked it.

He had a taste of mindfulness practice, that is why the article he wrote is good. Because what is the use of interviewing if you don't know the practice? And then I walked with him to his car. Halfway I asked him to stop and I proposed to him to look up at the blue sky and, breathing in I am aware of the blue sky, breathing out I smile to the blue sky. And we stood there looking at the sky, breathing in and out together and smiling. And he told me, it is wonderful, it is the first time I look at the sky that way, very deep. The sky revealed itself to him entirely because he was there one hundred percent for the sky. Many of us have looked at the sky, have seen the sky of course, but not in that way. If our mindfulness is clear then the sky will reveal itself to us in such a deep way. So, drink your tea, sit with your son or daughter, look at the sky in such a way that life be possible in that moment. That is life.

The word Buddhism comes from the root Budh. Budh means to wake up, to be awake, to know what is going on. Budh means to know also, to know what is going on and the one who is awake, the one who is mindful knowing what is going on, that one we call him/her a Buddha. Buddha is not the name of a person, Buddha is just a word that describes someone who is really present, awake, knowing what is happening and that is why the energy that inhabits the Buddha is the energy of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the capacity of being truly present in the moment. And when we drink our tea perfectly in mindfulness we are a Buddha but because we don't practice we are not a full time Buddha. We are a Buddha for a few seconds and then we are non-Buddha again. That is why with the support of a community we can be more and more a Buddha.

Practicing mindfulness you will develop the capacity of being free, we cultivate our freedom and we know that freedom is the foundation of our happiness. There is no happiness without freedom. When we walk we can walk as a free person or as a slave, it depends on your way of walking. If you are caught by your anger, by your worry about the future, by your guilt concerning the past then you are not a free person, you walk but you are a slave. But if you are capable of making steps that are solid, peaceful, and if you enjoy every step that you make you are free from your worries, your fear, your regret and then you are a free person. And being a free person you can be very happy. So the amount of happiness you have depends on the amount of freedom you have in your heart. So, the practice of mindfulness, being there in the here and the now is really the practice of freedom. Not to allow yourself to be caught by the past, by the future, by your worries, by your anxieties. Free yourself in order to be there in the here and the now, to touch the wonders of life that are available in the here and the now, that is the practice of mindfulness.

During walking meditation, whether we walk alone or walk with a group of people we should learn how to walk as a free person. And as a free person you can enjoy every step you make. The earth that you tread becomes the Kingdom of God, becomes the Buddha Land. Whether it is hell or the Kindom of God depends on us on our way of walking. If we are full of sorrow, of fear, of anger, of violence, the very ground

that we walk, that we tread becomes hell. But if we are a free person, if we have the energy of love, compassion, understanding and freedom in our heart and then the place will become the Kingdom of God, the Buddha Land. Everything depends on us, everything depends on our freedom and that is why practicing Buddhist meditation means to contemplate your freedom.

When you clean the floor, when you clean the bathroom or the kitchen you can do that as a slave or as a free person. As a slave you suffer but the other person while scrubbing the floor, cleaning the bathroom is very happy because she is a free person, it depends on your way. And mindfulness helps you to free yourself, and you can clean the bathroom with a lot of love and understanding, with a smile and that is an expression of your love and doing the work of cleaning the bathroom or the kitchen you get a lot of happiness. But if you are accompanied by your anger, discrimination and despair, cleaning the bathroom or the kitchen may become hard labor and we suffer a lot, every minute of doing it. That is why the practice of mindfulness can be described as the practice of freedom. Cultivating freedom. Where is the freedom? Is the freedom possible? Is there any freedom at all? The answer is yes! Freedom is possible and it comes from the practice of mindfulness. When you clean the bathroom with mindfulness, aware of every moment, aware that you are cleaning the bathroom, you are cultivating your freedom. But if you clean the bathroom in forgetfulness, being caught in your anger, your jealousy, in your worries and fear, there is no freedom at all.

Bell

When we practice walking meditation we invest one hundred percent of ourselves in the act of walking. When our body and our mind are fully concentrated on the act of making a step, the energy that helps us to do that is mindfulness and when mindfulness is there we are concentrated and the object of our concentration is the step we are making. Mindfulness plus concentration will bring forth the solidity, the freedom and the happiness. During the whole time we are walking we keep the energy of mindfulness alive in us, we are entering in the present moment. And when you look upon a person walking, sitting, lying down, cooking, watering the vegetable garden you can see if that person is anchored in the present moment or not.

In the here and the now. Our practice is to learn how to be anchored in the here and the now, all the time. Not to lose ourselves in forgetfulness. Forgetfulness means, we allow ourselves to be carried away by the past, by the future and so on. That is the way of cultivating freedom and when you do that, your brother, your sister around you will learn from you. She will go back to herself, he will go back to himself and walk like you do, breathe like you do, sit like you do and you become a bell of mindfulness for other people. Everyone is practicing freedom and we know that the amount of freedom determines the amount of happiness we have.

When you go back to the present moment you have a chance to recognize many of the wonders of life that are available in the present moment. You need to be in touch with them for your nourishment, for your healing and transformation because there are many things that are refreshing and healing and nourishing around us, and even

within us is a lot of goodness. When we go back to ourselves we recognize things that are not good, but if we continue to be there in us we will be able to touch the goodness within us. The same is true of the other person. When you focus your attention on him or her you may have the impression that person does not have enough goodness but that is your first impression only. If you really have enough mindfulness and concentration you will be able to discover that the person also has the potential to be a good person and if you know how to touch the goodness within her then she will be transformed into a very pleasant person.

If you live in a superficial way we can recognize only what is wrong, but we are not capable of realizing what is not wrong in us, in the other person and around us. We have the tendency to think that what is wrong is overwhelming and that is why we have a lot of depression and anger and fear but if we are capable of establishing ourselves firmly in the here and the now we will be able to recognize the positive elements that are still available in us and around us.

Suppose you get into a garden and you see a number of trees dying and you become depressed. You are not capable of noticing that there are still many trees that are healthy and beautiful. You should be able to notice the presence of these beautiful and healthy trees in order to enjoy them. And if you are supported by these beautiful, positive aspects of life you will be strong enough in order to take care of what is wrong, namely the trees that are dying. We protect what is not wrong and we try to help with what is wrong and that is our situation.

To allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the negative feeling when we touch what is wrong, is not a good thing to do. Therefore we should be able to be there in order to recognize the positive elements for our nourishment and healing. And we need a friend, a brother, a sister who practices in order to help us realize that. A good dharma brother, a good dharma sister will tell you that there are still many wonderful things around, and if you know how to be in touch with them you get the nourishment and healing that you need. Then you will be strong enough to take care of what is wrong.

There are things that are very much to our liking, but mindfulness helps us not to be possessive, attached to them. We know that the fresh breeze, the clean air, the beautiful sky are all wonderful and we can profit from them, and we need time. But you don’t need to possess them, you don’t need to be attached to them. You don’t have to make them your own, preventing the other people to profit from them. Mindfulness is the kind of energy that can help you to identify and to recognize what is there, and also to keep you free.

You see something beautiful, you see someone beautiful, and if you have freedom in you will be capable of enjoying that beauty. Mindfulness will help you not to be attached to it, not to be a slave of it, not to try to possess that to make it yours, and to prevent others from enjoying it. Mindfulness has been described as the act of recognizing things as they are, mere recognition of what is there. When we see a rose blooming, we recognize there is a rose blooming. When we see that the rose is beautiful we say, the rose is beautiful, simple recognition of what is there. You do not try to be there to tie it to you, to possess it, to be attached

to it, or to run away from it, to suppress it or to try to discriminate against it.

When we do something negative your mindfulness will tell you, this is something negative. When you see something not beautiful, your mindfulness will help you to see, this is not so beautiful. Simple recognition of what is there, and how it is; that is the practice of mindfulness. Suppose you have a feeling of joy and breathing in you are aware of the feeling of joy in yourself. Mindfulness is the capacity of recognizing that joy is there in you; that is the practice. And mindfulness also helps you not to be a possessor of joy, trying to possess that joy, trying to make that joy exclusively yours. And that is why when that feeling of joy is no longer there you don’t suffer.

When you have a feeling of non-joy arising in you, an unpleasant feeling, mindfulness will help you to recognize it as an unpleasant feeling. Mere recognition that it is an unpleasant feeling and you are still free from that feeling. Breathing in I know that a feeling is in me, breathing out I smile to the feeling. Breathing in I know that this feeling is unpleasant, breathing out I smile to the unpleasant feeling in me. You recognize the feeling and yet you are not a slave of that feeling, whether that feeling is pleasant or unpleasant. In both cases you remain a free person and as a free person you don’t suffer much, that is the secret.

Even if you have a physical pain. If you have a physical pain mindfulness will help you to know, to be aware that a physical pain is there. Breathing in I know that there is a physical pain in me, breathing out I smile to the physical pain, and somehow you may remain a free person. If you try very hard to suppress the physical pain, you try to resist, your suffering is increased by ten times, twenty times because you are not free. If you are free you suffer very little, if you are not free you suffer ten times, twenty times more, that is why mindfulness can help. I repeat this, if it is a pleasant feeling, recognize it simply as a pleasant feeling, not to be attached to it, not try to possess it, not try to make it last longer, not try to make it eternal. Because if you do you will suffer, because everything is impermanent, including your pleasant feeling. So, whether the pleasant feeling is there or is not there, you are a free person and that is the key of your happiness.

If the unpleasant feeling is there, recognize it as being there, not trying to resist, not trying to combat,and then you are still a free person, you don’t have to suffer much because an unpleasant feeling is also impermanent. Any feeling is impermanent, whether pleasant or unpleasant, and you are not touched by the unpleasant feeling, whether it is mental or physical. When you have physical pain you tend to worry a lot, you tend to resist a lot, you really want to hurry in order to remove the physical pain. And that kind of tension, that kind of resistance, that kind of attitude will make the physical pain in you double, triple, ten times, one hundred times more intense, that is why mindfulness practice is just to recognize it as it is, smiling to it. The practice of mindfulness is to maintain your freedom in order for you not to suffer.

The Buddha offers us this example. Suppose someone is struck by an arrow. He is

suffering. Suppose a second arrow comes and strikes exactly that same spot, now the pain will not be double, the pain can be ten times or fifty times more intense. So, if you have a mental or physical pain and you recognize it with freedom then you just suffer a little bit, but if you resist, if you are eager to suppress it, if you get angry, if you get a lot of worries and fear then your unpleasant feelings will be one hundred times more intense and you suffer a lot. And that is the second arrow. Never allow the second arrow to hit you, that is the practice. And only the freedom, with the practice of mindfulness, you can avoid the second arrow to come and hit you, simple recognition, mere recognition, is a very wonderful practice. And if you know how to practice mindfulness of relaxation, mindfulness of smiling, of breathing and then the feeling whether mental or physical will diminish and you know that if you are allowed to be touched by the healing, refreshing elements within and around you there will be a transformation and then the unpleasant feeling in you whether mental or physical will be relieved little by little. You know what to do and what not to do in order for the pain not to increase. And to know what to do and what not to do is the job of mindfulness because if you are mindful you know the situation well. If you are in the here and the now you know the situation better, and if you know the situation better you know what to do, and especially what not to do, in order not to make the situation worse. That is why mindfulness practice is very crucial in our daily life.

When we come to a practice center where people practice mindfulness, we have a chance to learn the art of mindful living. You have the chance to learn walking in mindfulness so you can enjoy every step you take. Walking in mindfulness is what all of us are supposed to do in Plum Village and the technique of walking is simple. Produce your true presence, body and mind united and make one step. Not to allow yourself to be carried away by the past or by the future, your projects, by your fear and just be there and enjoy making one step: with freedom, of course. Freedom from the past, freedom from the future, freedom from your projects, freedom from your resistance. Allow yourself to be there in the here and the now and make one step and you become a Buddha; a walking Buddha and if you are capable of making one step like that you know that you can make a second step and you can make also a third step. And your walking becomes very healing and transforming and you are supported by other brothers and sisters around you because they are practicing the same walking with freedom and enjoying every step they make. Walking as a free person. Walk like a free person and not a slave.

When we say the Kingdom of God is at hand, you have to say, are you ready to enter the Kingdom of God? The Kingdom of God is available, the Pure Land is available, it is there, it is only you who are not ready. You have no freedom, therefore the Kingdom of God is not yours, the Buddha Land is not yours. The Kingdom of God is only for those who are free and cultivating our freedom is your practice. Life is full of wonders, if you are free you come in touch with all these wonders, they all belong to the Kingdom of God. That is why, to allow yourself to be carried by your resistance, your fear, your anger is to run away on the Kingdom of God. Knowing that the Kingdom of God is there waiting for you with all the wonders, abandon all these kinds of worries and fears, and anger and resistance in breath, outbreath and produce your true presence, your freedom and with only one step you can step into the Kingdom of God.

I remember twenty years ago speaking in a church in the vicinity of Philadelphia, a church attended by the black people I made that declaration for the first time; you don’t have to die in order to enter the Kingdom of God, in fact, you have to be

very alive. Free yourself, go back to the here and the now and with only one step you can already enter into the Kingdom of God. And during another retreat in Plum Village with Catholic nuns and monks, during the time we sit in the woods after walking meditation I turned to my friends and I said, "the Kingdom of God is now or never…" so be ready for it. And your practice is to walk in the Kingdom of God every day and if you are capable of doing it in Plum Village, you will be able to do it in Philadelphia, in New York City, Zurich, Bangkok and so on. So this is the place to train yourself to walk in the Kingdom of God. If you wait until you die it may be too late. And to me the Kingdom of God, the Buddha Land is available only in the here and the now; the message is very clear, otherwise we waste our life.

With our steps, with our mindful steps, we get anchored in the here and the now - the only address of life. The only real address of life: all the other addresses are fake. The real address of life is here and now, including the zip code. And if you ask the address of the Kingdom of God, the address of the Buddha, of Bodhisattvas I will tell you, the same address, here and now. Therefore our practice is to go back all the time to the here and the now in order to encounter true life and in order to encounter the Kingdom of God, the Buddha Land. And if your practice is strong, authentic, then you get it today, you don’t need tomorrow, you can get it today. And the more you practice the more you enjoy, the practice is enjoyable. You don’t practice for the future, you practice for the here and the now because the Dharma is described as not a matter of time, transcending time. The Dharma is for the here and the now.

With the practice of mindful breathing also you get anchored in the here and the now. Breathe in and out in such a way that you establish yourself always in the here and the now, while you eat, while you drink, while you wash dishes, while you sit with your son, your daughter, your brother, your sister. The practice of mindful breathing or mindful walking is very crucial, very basic in Plum Village.

The Buddha said, if you practice mindfulness in seven years you get your freedom, your emancipation. And then he said, you don’t need seven years, one year may be enough if you practice mindfulness and then in one year you get your freedom. And after that he said, maybe you don’t need one year, you need seven months and if you practice with all your heart in seven months you get your freedom, your emancipation. And then he looked at his disciples and he said, maybe you don’t need seven months, you need seven days. Because if you get down to the practice, you practice with all your heart in seven days you get your freedom, it means your total happiness. And then he looked at them again and said, maybe you don’t need seven days, you need one day, twenty four hours. You put all your strength, your heart into it and then in twenty four hours you can get your freedom and your happiness. And these words are recorded at the end of a discourse called Sattipattana Sutta, the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. It is very meaningful, because every minute of the practice can already bring you joy and emancipation. It means that with only one step you can already get some freedom, with another step you get more freedom. One in breath you get some freedom, one out breath you can more freedom, you are cultivating your freedom all the time. because no happiness, no peace, no stability will be possible without freedom. So we can attribute, we can describe that the practice of mindfulness is the practice of freedom.

This morning we talked about the mindfulness trainings, the mindful manners as means to protect our freedom and to develop our freedom and now we are talking about the practice of breathing, of walking, of cleaning, as a practice of freedom also. Freedom is so precious for us, and that is why we come to the Sangha, we come to the practice center.

In our tradition, in our Zen tradition if you are in the meditation hall, in the Dharma hall you have to keep very quiet, very still. You are expected not to produce any noise. As soon as you arrive in the Dharma hall or in the meditation hall you sit down and you begin to practice mindful breathing. You don’t talk, you don’t do anything to create any noise. That is very important because the noise, even small noises, will harm the practice of other people. Out of respect for the Sangha we should be sitting very still and not making movements or other noises. This is in the tradition. It is very helpful and we have to learn how to do it. There should be no talking in the meditation hall, in the Dharma hall.